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Boehner Says Losses in Election Won't Affect Budget Stance

By **JONATHAN WEISMAN** and **JEREMY W. PETERS**

WASHINGTON — Speaker [John A. Boehner](#) said Thursday that election losses last November would not deter his party from pressing its vision of reducing the size of government and turning government health care programs largely over to the private sector — with no more tax increases.

In an interview, Mr. Boehner said that candidates and personalities — not Republican proposals on [Medicare](#) and spending cuts — accounted for the party's defeats, taking a hard line on further budget talks even as Senate Republicans met with President Obama in a search for common ground.

“There are a lot of things that decide an election, especially the two candidates that you have, the personalities that they have, positions they have taken,” he said.

“There are a lot of factors that went into that election,” he added. “I don't know that that's the issue. Eighty percent of the American people think that Washington has a spending problem.”

The speaker's tough stance on differences with the president came as Mr. Obama pursued his outreach to Congressional Republicans, this time in the Senate. For almost an hour and a half, the president and Senate Republicans jostled cordially on entitlement spending, the [Keystone XL](#) pipeline, the White House's role on [immigration](#) proposals and whether an overhaul of the tax code should generate more revenues through higher taxes or only economic growth.

Neither side offered concrete movement toward the other, but the president and Senate Republicans agreed they had a narrow window — perhaps through July — to reach an accord, and both sides agreed to try.

“I specifically said, to get to a big deal you have to work with us. You have to grind it out with us until we get there. You can't break off and say, ‘Oh, Congress has to do it,’ ” said Senator John Hoeven, Republican of North Dakota, who added that Republicans and the president agreed the window would most likely close by July. That is when Republicans could pick a fight over the [debt ceiling](#) and when Mr. Obama said the politics of the midterm elections would begin to take hold.

Representative Nancy Pelosi of California, the House Democratic leader, also struck a conciliatory note in an interview, saying she was open to examining a change in the way the government calculates inflation to slow the growth of [Social Security](#) and other benefit programs, while slowly boosting tax revenues.

That tone contrasted sharply with the direction House Republicans are taking. Although Mr. Boehner expressed some hope that the divided Congress could reach a deficit accord, he gave little indication that Mr. Obama's overtures to House Republicans had yielded tangible movement.

Mr. Boehner also put the failure of his private budget talks with the president squarely on the White House's shoulders, saying that avenue toward agreement was now closed.

“I gave the president my bottom line, and he didn't budge off it,” Mr. Boehner said. “We offered to continue to have the talks. It was the White House who said, ‘Well, there isn't really any reason to.’ ”

The House budget, which will come for a vote in the next week, seeks to bring taxes and spending

into balance within 10 years, largely by rolling back key measures from the president's first term. It would repeal his health insurance exchanges and expansion of [Medicaid](#), but retain cuts to Medicare that the Republican presidential ticket, Mitt Romney and Representative Paul D. Ryan of Wisconsin, spent months denouncing.

It would maintain the level of taxation secured by increases on the wealthy in the January deal to resolve the so-called fiscal cliff. But it also says the top tax rate should fall to 25 percent from 39.6 percent, with the cost offset by eliminating undisclosed tax deductions, credits and loopholes. And it assumes the repeal of Mr. Obama's Wall Street regulatory bill. Medicaid, food stamps and other programs for the poor would be cut significantly, part of \$4.6 trillion in cuts through 2023.

"The budget is an opportunity to lay out your priorities, what your party believes in, and that's exactly what our budget does," Mr. Boehner said.

It was not clear, however, how those priorities are to be meshed with a Senate Democratic budget that would expand spending on infrastructure, raise taxes and still end up with a budget deficit of \$566 billion at the end of the 10-year window.

"His budget was roundly defeated last November," Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the majority leader, said of the Republican plan, drafted by Mr. Ryan. "I can't imagine why they don't get a new dance step here."

Ms. Pelosi did suggest that there was some Democratic latitude on the biggest issue for Republicans: changes to entitlement programs like Social Security and Medicare. She repeated her resolute opposition to raising the Medicare eligibility age. But she said she would look at changing the way the government calculates inflation, while raising tax revenue over time. "I want a debate in our caucus," she said. "There are views, some of them on the progressive side of the spectrum, who think that this can be done without hurting the poor or the very elderly."

Mr. Obama assured Senate Republicans that a decision on the Keystone pipeline would come "within months, not years," senators said, offering criticism that environmentalists had overstated its potential impact. They discussed at length whether a tax code overhaul would provide the economic boost the president needs to jump-start tax receipts — with overall tax increases.

The president offered lavish praise for his 2008 rival, Senator John McCain from Arizona, on the 40th anniversary of Mr. McCain's release from a Vietnamese prisoner of war camp, a moment that drew warm applause.

Mr. Obama told the gathering that they received him more warmly than their House counterparts did. "He mentioned — well, joked — about it being a more genteel environment," said Senator Jeff Flake, Republican of Arizona.

But Democratic olive branches are going to require a reciprocal gesture from the Republicans, the president told them, and Mr. Boehner made no such offer.

In a meeting later with House Democrats, Mr. Obama acknowledged the realities of a divided government, saying, "We're obviously going to have to talk about some things that we don't particularly like," according to Representative Peter Welch of Vermont. "It was a dose of reality," Mr. Welch said, adding that he reassured them, "We're not going to chase a bad deal."

Mr. Boehner said Republicans had already allowed \$650 billion in new taxes and would not agree to more. Nonetheless, he expressed guarded optimism that the House and Senate could eventually come together. "Maybe something comes out of it," he said. "Hope springs eternal."

